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ABSTRACT

This investigation attempts to explore the relationship between self concept and socio-economic status (SES) of children from 8 to 14 years of age. In a sample of 3789 children in central U. S. children of low SES scored higher than children of middle SES at all ages, in both sexes, among blacks as well as whites, and in rural areas as well as urban. The self concept yardstick used, Coopersmith's "Self Esteem Inventory", provides 4 subscale scores: general self, social self-peers, school-academic, and home-parents. Low SES youngsters scored higher on all subscales except home-parents. (Author)

Final Report

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RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SELF CONCEPT, SCHOOL PERFORMANCE, AND DIVERGENT THINKING

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U. S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION, AND WELFARE

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF
HEALTH, EDUCATION, AND WELFARE

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Relationship Between Self Concept, School Performance, and Divergent Thinking

In an earlier study which was part of a four year longitudinal investigation conducted under a large, federally funded Title III project[1] it was found that children of low socio-economic status scored significantly higher than children of middle socio-economic status (Clark and Trowbridge, 1971; Trowbridge 1969, 1970a, 1970b) on a self concept instrument known as the Self Esteem Inventory (Coopersmith, 1965).

The number of investigations of the relationship between self concept and socio-economic status has been increasing, but the relationship remains unclear. Findings appear to be in conflict. A number of persons have postulated that children of low socio-economic status do actually reflect the negative image society holds of them (Ausubel and Ausubel, 1963; Erickson, 1963; Witty, 1967). Some investigations appear to support this thesis (Deutsch, 1960; Long and Henderson, 1968; Wylie, 1963), while others suggest no significant differences in self concept of children of different socio-economic status (Coleman, 1966; McDaniel, 1967; Scott, 1969). Studies by Clark and Trowbridge (1971); Soares and Soares (1969, 1970); Trowbridge (1969, 1970) and Zirkel and Moses (1971) indicate that the self concept of low socio-economic status children may even exceed that of middle class children.

[1]Project was funded under Title III, Public Law 89-10, Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, Grant No. OEG-3-7-703575-5055; as well as Grant No. OEG-0-9-254064-1820-725 under the Education Professions Development Act (EPDA). The author wishes to express appreciation for the assistance and cooperation of the staff of the project, especially Drs. Bill Clark, Joe Millard and Marl Ramsey; Helen Coe, Rita BeLieu and Shirley Whitaker. The author is also grateful for four years of support and sincere interest from the Polk County Board of Education and Dr. Ralph Norris, County Superintendent of Schools.

The problem of interpreting such conflicting results is most difficult. Zirkel and Moses (1971, p. 254) in their recent review of self concept studies suggest that "reasons for the inconsistencies seem to be varied and diverse. Some of these may be attributed to differences in definitions, instruments, research designs, age groups, regions, times, and the individuality of human beings which defies categorization."

Though the findings and research results vary, the notion that self concept is an important variable in school performance and in life is widely accepted.

PURPOSES

The present study was designed to determine: (1) whether measurable differences in self concept existed between children of different socio-economic status, (2) the dimensions of self concept in which differences occurred, and (3) whether the differences in self concept by socio-economic status found in the Trowbridge (1969, 1970) studies were confounded with other variables such as race, age, sex, and density of population.

The investigation[2] differed in a number of ways from the earlier studies. The changes were largely improvements to correct certain suggested weaknesses. Major revisions were: a larger sample, more closely supervised test administration, and the collection of additional personal data on each subject (age, race, sex). The present

[2]U.S.O.E. Grant No. OEG-6-70-0020 (509); Project No. 0-F-051

investigation also was designed so that: (1) subscale scores and even individual items, representing different dimensions of self concept, could be reported separately, (2) self concept results could be separated by race, age, sex, and population density. The separation of data stated in (2) was suggested by the possibility that racial self concept differences might be more important to the previous finding than socio-economic status differences. Self concept differences by age, sex, and population density were investigated for the same reason.

Criteria for Determining Socio-Economic Status (SES)

The ideal manner of establishing socio-economic status (SES) is by individual, so that criteria being used may be applied to each specific person or family. A common criterion for classifying families as to SES is the occupation of the wage earner. A frequently used measure for this method is one developed by Warner (1949). This procedure is used because actual family income figures, the obvious ideal criterion, are nearly impossible to obtain.

Although family income figures for any particular student are not available, Title I of Public Law 89-10, known as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965), makes possible the identification of schools where the majority of the students are economically disadvantaged and can be considered to be in a low socio-economic status. These schools are essentially those entitled to receive federal funds under the law because enough families served by the school have incomes below a certain level. Although some schools eligible for Title I funds have a relatively small percent of low income families, those chosen to

represent the low SES for this study were from schools with a preponderence of low income families. The low SES classification given to over 1600 students of this study is based on the classification of the school the student attends and, more important, the neighborhood in which he lives, rather than a classification based on specific family income. By stricter standards a relative few of these children may have been misclassified, but it was known that few middle or high SES children attended the schools selected.

For the contrasting middle SES classification, it was necessary to find a different criterion, since family income figures are not obtained for schools not expecting to qualify for Title I. Home evaluations, available for property tax purposes, were used. A school was considered to be middle SES if 90% of the home evaluations in its population area translated (in 1970) into market values of $12,000-$24,000. Results were roughly checked by examining the wage earner's occupation (available from school records) and a middle SES school classification confirmed.

Criteria for Determining Self Concept

The instrument chosen to measure self concept was Stanley Coopersmith's Self Esteem Inventory (CSEI) (1965). Experiences in pilot studies using various measures of self-perception, self-esteem, and self-concept made clear the exceptional difficulties involved in measurement in this area, mainly due to the complexity of problems of definition and of criteria. The Coopersmith instrument was chosen primarily because of its wide use (Butcher, 1967; Campbell, 1965; Coopersmith, 1967; Ketcham and Morse, 1965; Whitt, 1966; Zirkel and

Moses, 1971), because of the body of normative data available, and because it had proven effective and workable in the earlier investigations.

The CSEI is a self report or self inventory consisting of 58 items designed specifically for children from about 9 to 14 years. It asks only whether a certain attitude or characteristic is "like me" or "unlike me" as the child perceives himself. The maximum possible score, representing the highest possible self concept, is 100. The national average score found by Coopersmith was 70.

The 50 scored items are subdivided into a total of four subscales: (1) general self (26 items); (2) social self-peers (8) items: (3) home-parents (8 items); (4) school-academic (8 items). There is also a lie scale of 8 items not counted in scoring the test, since its only purpose is to eliminate non-meaningful responses. Each of the 50 items has a weight of two, making the possible total of 100.

The eight items of the lie scale are absolute statements to which few children would answer "like me," such as: "I never worry about anything"; "I always do the right thing"; and "I'm never unhappy.". If more than three of these statements are answered "like me" the validity of the remainder of the test might be questioned. Less than $\frac{1}{2}\%$ of the children had high lie scale scores; these were eliminated from the study.

The CSEI employs the usual test design of having approximately half of its items answered "like me" for a positive self concept and the remaining half of the items requiring an unlike me" response to be scored in the direction of a positive self concept. For example, the item "If I have something to say, I usually say it" would be scored in

a positive direction if the child answered "like me," whereas the item "My teacher makes me feel I'm not good enough" would be scored in a negative direction if the child answered "like me."

PROCEDURE

There were 433 classrooms selected from a total of 42 elementary schools, from both urban and rural parts of central Iowa. The classrooms were classified by SES and population density as follows:

SES/Density	Urban-Suburban	Rural-Small Town	Total
Low	37	27	64
Middle	38	31	69
Total	75	58	133

No random selection of classrooms was attempted. Classrooms chosen were largely those where the researcher had met the teacher in other parts of the larger study, and could easily obtain the necessary teacher co-operation.

The CESI was administered by the teacher in the classroom to the entire class. The researcher first discussed the test instrument and general administration procedures with the teachers involved in the studies. Some teachers scored their own tests before sending them to the research project; but all tests were re-scored by the researchers. In many schools a graduate student assisted the teacher in the test administration and in scoring the tests. The CESI was usually given early in the school day.

RESULTS

The total and subtotal scores for each child were computed according to Coopersmith's key. The means of the total scores for various groups are given in Table 1. Standard deviations were in the range from 2 to 4, and are not shown. A t test for comparison of means was used.

[Insert Table 1]

Table 1 clearly indicates that the SES differences were the most important, though race and population density differences were also statistically significant. Because of the small differences by age and sex, these two variables were dropped from further statistical analysis.

An analysis of variance design then was used to analyze the data by SES, race, and population density, with the results shown in Table 2.

[Insert Table 2]

Table 2 indicates that the SES factor was highly significant; an examination of Table 1 readily reveals that lower SES children had consistently higher means than middle SES children. Table 2 shows that the race factor was also significant, and Table 1 shows that means for self concept of black children were higher than those of white children. The density of population factor was also significant with the table of means revealing that the rural-small town children hold higher self concepts than the urban-suburban. However, SES differences were much greater than race or density of population differences. Inter-action variances in all cases were insignificant, indicating that the important SES differences go across both races, and in both urban and rural areas.

The remainder of the report is devoted to an exploration of the specific areas in which low-income youngsters showed higher self concepts than middle income children. For this problem the subscales of the CSEI and eventually the individual items were studied. Table 3 shows means of the subscales.

Insert Table 3

As can be seen in Table 3, only on the home-parents subscale did middle SES children score higher.

Examination of individual items which comprise each of the subscales serves to illuminate the differences. Of the 26 items in the general self subscale the eleven items shown in Table 4 were those which most differentiated the two SES groups. A "like me" response sometimes is scored in the direction of a positive self concept, while at other times in a negative direction. The direction of the item is shown adjacent to it. All percents shown in Table 4 and following tables are percent of "like me" responses. The items are ranked in the order of Δ, the percent of low SES students giving the positive self concept response, minus the percent of middle SES who do so. Items above the dotted line (positive Δ) are those on which low SES children show a higher self concept; on those below the dotted line (negative Δ), middle SES children show a stronger self concept.

Insert Table 4

Table 4 suggests that the low SES child feels more sure of himself in a number of ways; he believes he can take care of himself, he can make up his mind, and he thinks that what he has to say is worth saying. In fact,

he responds that he is sure of himself, happy, and not usually bothered by things.

Consideration of items below the dotted line, those on which the middle SES child scores higher, suggests that he perceives a stronger self concept than his low SES peer in terms of adjusting to new things, understanding himself, and not being easily upset when scolded. However, these differences are not as great as those above the dotted line.

The next subscale studied was the one which included items pertaining to social self-peers. Table 5, constructed similarly to Table 4, displays these results.

[Insert Table 5]

The items suggest that the low SES child feels more comfortable with his peers, thinks he is easy to like, perceives himself as popular and feels that his friends usually follow his ideas.

The middle SES child has a slightly better self image in terms of liking to be with other people, thinking he is fun to be with, and preferring to play with children his own age.

In the third subscale studied, comprised of questions about school, the items in Table 6, most differentiated the two SES groups. It is interesting to note that differences in this subscale were of greater magnitude than those in the former two.

[Insert Table 6]

This subscale was the most internally consistent with low SES children perceiving their school life in a more positive way on all

items except one. Apparently the low SES child feels he is a more able, worthwhile person in school and in the eyes of his teacher than does his middle SES counterpart.

If there were any dimension of self concept about which reason would suggest that middle SES children might perceive themselves more positively, it would be the school dimension, because they excel on measures (grades, achievement tests) used to evaluate school performance. However, data of this study strongly indicate that the middle income child has a lower image of himself in terms of school.

The one item on which the middle SES child did score higher was "I'm doing the best work I can." This item needs further explanation. It was the only item in the instrument on which teachers and children differed from the test developer concerning what constitutes a positive self concept. The test scoring key gives credit for a "like me" answer as indicating positive self concept. Children consistently provided information that individuals doing the best work they could were probably under stress and tension, whereas "not like me" children have a more positive feeling. Low SES children seldom felt they were doing the best work they could, but were quite happy with their school performance. If this item were scored the other direction, low SES children would exceed middle SES on every item in the school scale.

Part of the research, not reported here, involved a discussion between the teacher and her students about their reasons for responding as they did on each item. Two major reasons why low SES children felt better about school were repeatedly suggested in these discussions. One was concerned with their expectations in school, what educators often term "level of aspiration."

On many items low SES children seemed to expect less of themselves in school, having a lower aspiration level than middle SES children. They also perceived parents, teachers, and peers as expecting less of them, but it was a comfortable feeling. To excel seemed to be equated with stress and tension in many children of both SES classes. A common response was that the child felt happy with the way he was behaving so he saw no reason to struggle for higher levels.

The second reason low SES children felt better about school was that when they perceived their school experience as poor, they did not internalize the poor experience as their own, so it did not tear down their self concepts. Middle SES children, on the other hand, tended to view shortcomings of the school experience as being their fault; they had been taught that school is important, so when school was not perceived as such, their own self concepts were damaged.

One other hypothesis, though seldom verbalized by children, was frequently offered by teachers. Teachers suggested that few children think they are doing their best work in school; when a child perceives his school work as his best effort and teachers judge it as poor, this tends to lower the child's opinion of himself. If he feels he is not doing his best work then he can better accept lack of success. Teachers therefore tended to agree with students that the direction of one item should be reversed.

One finding of the larger study seems of interest here. It was concerned with the relation between self concept and school performance. Children's self concept scores were correlated with (1) standardized achievement test (Iowa Tests of Basic Skills) and (2) reading level scores. Within low SES

groups the correlation coefficients between self concept score and both achievement and reading scores ranged from .35 to .45. Children with higher self concepts tended to have higher school performance in both groups. However, when data from both SES groups were combined, the resulting coefficients ranged from -.07 to +.06; essentially no relationship. Low coefficients when groups were "mixed" were due to the fact that low SES children tended to have higher self concepts, while middle SES children tended to have higher achievement and reading test scores. Within a SES division, however, self concept and school performance were positively related.

On the final subscale made up of items about home, parents, and family, middle SES children scored higher than low SES. Since the findings of this subscale are a reversal of the others it is especially interesting to examine specific items.

Insert Table 7

Differences between the two groups are greater in the home-parents subscale than in the others, with the absolute values of three of the Δ's higher than 50. Evidently children of the two SES groups perceive differently some major aspects of their lives concerned with home and parents. Except for the two items concerned with feeling pushed, middle SES children have a more positive self perception of their homes and family life.

DISCUSSION

There were three major purposes of the study. First was to determine whether differences in self concept exist between children of different SES. Differences were found to exist; in general, low SES children have higher

self concept scores. Some current studies seem to have produced similar results, but others are in conflict.

The study then examined the specific dimensions in which differences existed. Perhaps the most useful contribution of the investigation was the

CSEI item analysis which detailed the specific areas of self concept differences.

The third purpose was to determine whether the socio-economic effects found in the earlier Trowbridge self-concept studies were confounded with other variables such as race, sex, age and density of population. Age and sex were found to be insignificant factors, whereas the SES effect seemed to go across population density. A shortage of middle SES blacks in the sample leaves the question as to race partially unanswered.

The self concept studies occurred as part of the evaluation of a federal project aimed at improving teaching through inservice teacher education. Therefore there was a strong commitment to report results back to teachers. Some teachers found it meaningful to know how their students responded to items such as, "My teacher makes me feel I'm not good enough." Parents may learn from responses to items such as, "No one pays much attention to me at home," or "My parents and I have a lot of fun together."

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Table 1

Means of Children's Scores on Coopersmith Self Esteem Inventory (CSEI)

Variable	N	Mean on CSEI
SES		
low	1662	74.1*
middle	2127	68.4
Age-Grade Level		
3rd	911	72.5
4th	896	72.2
5th	982	70.4
6th	635	68.8
7th	164	68.6
8th	201	68.5
Sex		
male	1947	70.8
female	1842	70.9
Density of Population		
rural-small town	1534	72.5*
urban-suburban	2255	69.6
Race		
black	681	73.6*
white	3108	70.0
Total	3789	70.9

*p < .05

Table 2

Analysis of Variance Results on Total CSEI Scores

Source of Variation	df	Sum of Squares	Mean Squares	F ratio
SES	1	87.1	87.1	15.9*
Race	1	32.8	32.8	6.4*
Density of Population	1	28.1	28.1	5.5*
SES X Race	1	11.6	11.6	n.s.
SES X Density	1	12.2	12.2	n.s.
Race X Density	1	14.7	14.7	n.s.
SES X Race X Density	1	12.5	12.5	n.s.
Within	3781	19472.2	5.15	
Total	3789			

*p <.05

Table 3

Means of Subscale Scores of the Coopersmith Self Esteem Inventory

Scale	Low SES	Middle SES
general self	36.3	33.5*
social self-peers	14.8	11.6*
school-academic	13.1	10.2*
home-parents	9.9	13.1*
	74.1	68.4

* $p < .05$

Table 4

Items from the CSEI General Self Subscale

Item	Direction of "like me" response	percent of children responding "like me"			
		low SES	middle SES	△	
I can usually take care of myself.	+	89.1	36.7	52.4	*
I can make up my mind and stick to it.	+	83.1	46.7	36.4	*
It's pretty tough to be me.	-	13.2	38.6	25.4	*
Things usually don't bother me.	+	81.6	59.4	22.2	*
I'm pretty sure of myself.	+	76.1	56.2	19.9	*
I can make up my mind without too much trouble.	+	77.3	59.8	17.5	*
I'm pretty happy.	+	64.7	51.5	13.2	*
If I have something to say, I usually say it.	+	75.6	62.7	12.9	*
It takes me a long time to get used to anything new.	-	24.6	6.2	-18.4	*
I understand myself.	+	27.3	44.7	-17.4	*
I get upset easily when I'm scolded.	-	58.3	67.4	-9.1	*

$p < .05$

Table 5

Items from the CSEI "Social Self-Peers" Subscale

Item	Direction of "like me" response	percent of children responding "like me"			
		low SES	middle SES	△	
Kids usually follow my ideas.	+	91.4	57.3	34.1	*
I'm popular with kids my own age.	+	88.6	68.5	20.1	*
Most people are better liked than I am.	-	19.3	36.3	17.0	*
I'm easy to like.	+	86.1	72.6	13.5	*
I don't like to be with other people.	-	22.4	6.5	-15.9	*
I'm a lot of fun to be with.	+	47.7	61.9	-14.2.	*
I would rather play with children younger than me.	-	27.6	19.2	-8.4	*

$p < .05$

Table 6

Items from the CSEI "School-Academic" Subscale

Item	Direction of "like me" response	percent of children responding "like me"			
		low SES	middle SES	△	
I like to be called on in class.	+	77.5	34.8	42.7	*
I'm not doing as well in school as I'd like to.	-	21.7	59.3	37.6	*
I find it very hard to talk in front of the class.	-	11.3	39.7	28.4	*
I'm proud of my school work.	+	68.3	46.4	21.9	*
I often feel upset in school.	-	6.5	19.1	12.6	*
My teacher makes me feel I'm not good enough.	-	29.7	39.8	10.1	*
I'm doing the best work I can.	-	6.1	44.5	-38.4	*

$p < .05$

Table 7

Items from the CSEI "Home-Parents" Subscale

Item	Direction of "like me" response	percent of children responding "like me"			
		low SES	middle SES	△	
My parents expect too much of me.	-	16.8	67.1	50.3	*
I feel as if my parents are pushing me.	-	10.1	39.6	29.5	*
My parents understand me.	+	26.1	77.4	-51.3	*
My parents usually consider my feelings.	+	37.5	88.2	-50.7	*
My parents and I have a lot of fun together.	+	41.8	64.2	-22.4	*
No one pays much attention to me at home.	-	41.3	19.6	-21.7	*
There are many times when I would like to leave home.	-	51.3	33.7	-17.6	*
I get upset easily at home.	-	31.6	18.8	-12.8	*

*$p < .05$